

Practicing counselors' preferences for supervisory focus and style

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Abstract:

A sample of National Certified Counselors preferred a collegial, relationship-oriented supervisor and a supervision emphasis on conceptual, personalization, and process skills. Only postdegree supervision experience was related to these preferences.

Keywords: clinical supervision | counseling | professional development

Article:

Increasingly, clinical supervision is being viewed as a critical component in counselor development across the professional life span (e.g., Blocher, 1983; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). It is assumed that the need for supervision continues beyond counselor training programs, but that counselors' supervision preferences change as they refine existing skills, develop new ones, and confront new professional challenges. Developmental models indicate that, in general, beginning counselors prefer a supervisor-teacher who focuses on specific counseling skills and techniques. Counselors at intermediate levels desire a supervisor-counselor who emphasizes self-awareness and relationship dynamics (e.g., transference and countertransference). More advanced counselors, including master counselors, seek out a supervisor-consultant who operates out of a peer-like collegial relationship.

Despite some theoretical criticism (Holloway, 1987), a substantial body of research has provided support for a developmental view of supervision (Worthington, 1987). In these investigations, counselor in training developmental level has been designated by one or more indexes of experience: educational background (degree level), counseling experience, and supervision experience (e.g., Friedlander & Ward, 1984; Heppner & Roehlke, 1984; Larson et al., 1992; McNeill, Stoltenberg, & Pierce, 1985; Miars et al., 1983; Reising & Daniels, 1983; Worthington, 1984). Counselors in training at various experience levels have indicated developmentally appropriate preferences for supervisory style, focus (emphasis), and approach. There also are indications, however, that experience level is not synonymous with developmental level (e.g., Borders, 1989) and that supervised, but not unsupervised, counseling experience contributes to counselor development (e.g., Wiley & Ray, 1986).

Thus, it is possible that counseling practitioners could represent several developmental levels, based on their varied degrees (i.e., master's, specialist, and doctoral), years of counseling experience, and amount of supervision (particularly postdegree supervision). In addition, practitioners with experience levels similar to those reported in previous research still might differ in their preferences because of their practitioner (versus student) status. As a result, it might be somewhat difficult to determine their preferences for supervisory style and emphasis. Thus, knowledge specific to practicing counselors' preferences would be helpful, particularly for their supervisors and for those who train their supervisors.

Therefore, we conducted a two-part survey of a national sample of counseling practitioners regarding their supervision preferences. Differential results by counseling setting were found for the first part of the survey, previously reported in Borders and Usher (1992). School counselors, in contrast with nonschool practitioners, preferred less frequent supervision and preferred a counselor (versus another helping professional) as a supervisor. School and nonschool counselors also differed significantly on two background variables of interest for this study: (a) School counselors reported more total months of full-time counseling experience than did counselors in community mental health or private practice and (b) school counselors reported significantly fewer hours of postdegree supervision than did respondents in community agencies and private practice (Borders & Usher, 1992). In fact, 45% of the school counselors in the original sample had received no postdegree supervision. Thus, this study examined supervision preferences separately for school and other counselors.

In the second part of the survey reported in this article, we focus on practitioners' preferences for supervisory style and emphasis. Based on the differential results by counseling setting found for the first part of the survey (Borders & Usher, 1992), our research questions included possible differences between school and nonschool counselors. Specifically, these questions were the following: (a) To what degree do practicing counselors indicate preferences for three measures of supervisory style (i.e., collegial, relationship-oriented, and content-focused), and are there significant differences between school and nonschool counselors on preferences for these styles; (b) to what degree do practicing counselors indicate preferences on four measures of supervision emphases (i.e., professional behaviors, process skills, personalization skills, and conceptual skills), and are there significant differences between school and nonschool counselors on these preferences for supervision emphasis; (c) among school counselors and nonschool counselors considered separately, are there significant differences on the three measures of supervisory style by the three indexes of experience typically used in developmentally based studies (i.e., degree level, counseling experience, and supervision experience); and (d) among school counselors and nonschool counselors considered separately, are there significant differences on the four measures of supervision emphases by these three experience indexes?

METHOD

Participants

We drew participants for this study from the national stratified sample (stratified by geographic region, date of highest degree) of National Certified Counselors (NCCs) who responded to the Borders and Usher (1992) survey. This original random sample of 729 counselors was drawn

from a National Board of Certified Counselors' listing of 17,406 NCCs; 357 counselors provided usable surveys, yielding a response rate of 51.4%.

A total of 274 respondents constituted the sample for this study: 106 respondents who identified themselves as school counselors (elementary, 30%; middle or junior high, 20%; and secondary, 50%) and 168 respondents who worked in community mental health agencies (15%), private practice (32%), college counseling centers (19%), higher education offices (5%), hospitals (4%), business and industry (3%), or a combination of these settings (23%). Thus, the sample used for this study represents 37.6% of the original sample surveyed. Most school counselors were White (87.7%) women (65.4%) between 40 and 49 years of age (51.4%). Counselors in the other work settings were also predominantly White (91%) women (65.9%) between 40 and 49 years of age (44.6%).

Classification Variables

Classification variables were composed of three indexes of experience used in previous developmentally based studies: degree level (having a master's, educational specialist, or doctoral degree), counseling experience (as measured by the number of full-time months of paid counseling work), and postdegree supervision experience (as measured by the number of hours of face-to-face counseling supervision received since obtaining one's degree).

Degree level was divided into (a) having a doctorate or educational specialist degree and (b) having a master's degree. The number of full-time months of counseling experience was categorized into three groups: (a) 0 to 5 years, (b) 5 to 10 years, and (c) 10 or more years. (Months were not converted to years for data analysis.) The number of hours of postdegree supervision was divided into (a) 0 to 48 hours of postdegree supervision, (b) 49 to 200 supervision hours, and (c) more than 200 hours of postdegree counseling supervision.

Dependent Variables

Style preferences. Respondents' degree of preference for supervisory styles was determined by scores on the scales of the Supervisory Styles Inventory-Revised (SSI-R). Friedlander and Ward (1984) defined supervisory style as "the supervisor's distinctive manner of approaching and responding to trainee and of implementing supervision" (p. 541). The SSI (Friedlander & Ward, 1984) purports to assess three dimensions of supervisory style: attractive- a collegial dimension of supervision measured by items such as warm, supportive, friendly, and open; interpersonally sensitive-- a relationship-oriented approach to supervision, measured by items such as invested, committed, therapeutic, and perceptive; and task-oriented-a content-focused style of supervision, which includes items such as goal oriented, thorough, focused, practical, and structured.

For the purposes of this study, respondents were asked to rate each item from 1 (not very important) to 7 (very important), indicating how important each would be for their preferred supervisor at this point in their professional careers. This represents a revision of the original instrument that was used with counselors in training to rate their "current or most recent primary supervisor's general style of supervision" (Friedlander & Ward, 1984, p. 545). Scale scores were calculated by obtaining the mean of the items on each scale; higher scores reflected a greater

preference for that supervisory style. Thus, three dependent variables were derived from the SSI-R and used in the analyses: the attractive, interpersonally sensitive, and task-oriented scale scores.

Reliability estimates reported for the SSI include internal consistency measures of .76 to .93; item-scale correlations of .70 to .88 for the attractive scale; .51 to .82 for the interpersonally sensitive scale; and .38 to .76 for the task-oriented scale (Friedlander & Ward, 1984). Cronbach's alpha calculated on the total sample used in this study was .87 for the attractive scale, .80 for the interpersonally sensitive scale, and .85 for the task-oriented scale of the SSI-R.

Friedlander and Ward (1984) demonstrated validity of the SSI by obtaining moderate to high positive relationships between the three scales and Stenack and Dye's (1982) supervisory role items. The researchers also found that the SSI scales were related to supervisors' theoretical orientations in expected ways.

To examine whether the factor structure for Friedlander and Ward's (1984) original study of supervisors' and counselors trainee's perceptions of supervisory style was similar to the factor structure of practicing counselors' preferences for supervisory style, Friedlander and Ward's factor analytic techniques were replicated. Similar factor loadings were obtained, suggesting that the underlying factor structure for both practicing counselors' preferences and supervisors' and counselors-in-training's perceptions on the SSI is essentially the same. Thus, it seemed appropriate to use the SSI with practicing counselors to measure their perceptions of supervisory style preference along the same dimensions.

Emphasis preferences. Respondents' degree of preference for supervisory emphases was determined by scores on the scales of the Supervisor Emphasis Rating Form-Revised (SERF-R). The SERF (Lanning, 1986) was designed to assess four areas that supervisors may emphasize in sessions with counselors in training: professional behaviors, referring to adherence to standards for and principles of professional practice; process skills, such as attending behaviors, questioning, immediacy, and self-disclosure; personalization skills, referring to inner attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of the counselor; and conceptual skills, such as cognitive abilities, identification of client themes, and choice of appropriate interventions. Lanning reported reliabilities for each scale on the original form ranging from .89 to .94: for the total instrument, the reliability estimate was .97. Intercorrelations between scales ranged from .64 to .78.

An adapted version of the SERF (Lanning, personal communication) was used in this study. In this revision, one item representing each of the four supervisory emphases was grouped together into sets (i.e., four items per set). Respondents were asked to rank the four items within each set from 1 (most emphasis) to 4 (least emphasis). For the purposes of this study, respondents rank ordered within each set to indicate which items they would want their supervisors to emphasize at this point in their careers. Scale scores were calculated by totaling the ranks of items on each scale. Thus, four dependent variables were derived from the SERF-R: the professional behaviors, process skills, personalization skills, and conceptual skills scales. Lower scores indicated a stronger preference for that supervisory emphasis.

Scale internal-consistency reliabilities of the SERF-R were calculated using the total sample for this study in two ways. Spearman-Brown corrected reliabilities were .692 for the professional behaviors scale; .617 for the process skills scale; .789 for the personalization skills scale; and .741 for the conceptual skills scale. Cronbach's alpha was .682 for the professional behaviors scale; .613 for the process skills scale; .703 for the personalization skills scale; and .712 for the conceptual skills scale.

RESULTS

First, descriptive statistics were computed for the SSI-R and the SERF-R scales for each group of counselors. Next, intercorrelations between all the SSI-R and SERF-R scales were calculated (see Table 1). In view of the moderate and high correlations among the SSI-R scales and among the SERF-R scales, multivariate analyses of variance were performed to address the research questions. Because low correlations were obtained between the SSI-R and SERF-R scales (see Table 1) and our interest was on supervisor style and supervisory emphasis as separate constructs, a multivariate analysis on all seven scale scores was not conducted.

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Dependent Variables

Dependent Variables	N	M	SD
	2	3	4
	5	6	7
Attractive SSI-R	306	5.99	0.84
	.57***	.31***	-.10
	.00	.01	.11
Interpersonally SSI-R	306	5.76	0.77
	—	.41***	-.05
	.14*	-.13*	.06
Task-Oriented SSI-R	306	4.78	0.98
	—	—	-.24***
	.05	.02**	-.04
Professional Behaviors SERF-R	296	44.88	6.45
	—	—	—
	-.37***	-.25***	-.38***
Process Skills SERF-R	297	36.61	6.18
	—	—	—
	—	-.28***	-.23***
Personalization Skills SERF-R	296	35.16	6.60
	—	—	—
	—	—	-.48***
Conceptual Skills SERF-R	296	33.21	7.02
	—	—	—
	—	—	—

Note. SSI-R = Supervisory Styles Inventory = Revised. SERF-R = Supervisor Emphasis Rating Form = Revised.
 a These Ns are larger than the Ns for this study, because this correlation analysis includes counselors who did not specify their work settings on the original survey questionnaire.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

There was little variability in supervision experience for school counselors. Therefore, classification variables for this group were limited to degree level and counseling experience. For other counselors, degree level, counseling experience, and postdegree supervision experience

were included as effects in the models. The significant effects were followed by Tukey's HSD tests for multiple comparisons to determine group differences.

Means and standard deviations for the SSI-R and SERF-R scales for the school and nonschool counselors are presented in Table 2. In regard to our research question concerning degree of preference for the various supervisor styles, both groups of practicing counselors preferred the attractive style and the interpersonally sensitive style about equally, and both of the groups preferred the task-oriented supervisor style least (see Table 2). One-way analyses of variance, however, revealed that school counselors preferred the task-oriented style to a significantly greater degree than did the counselors in other settings, $F(1,236) = 11.32, p < .001$.

TABLE 2. SSI-R and SERF-R Mean Scale Scores by Work Setting

Item	School Counselors			Other Counselors		
	N ^a	M	SD	N	M	SD
SSI-R Scales						
Attractive	94	6.19	0.70	144	5.93	0.89
Interpersonally Sensitive	94	5.73	0.68	144	5.80	0.81
Task-Oriented	94	5.02	0.88	144	4.59	1.02
SERF-R Scales ^b						
Professional Behaviors	93	44.36	6.28	141	45.04	6.37
Process Skills	93	34.97	5.78	141	38.39	5.26
Personalization Skills	93	37.13	5.92	141	33.72	6.72
Conceptual Skills	93	33.51	6.98	141	32.85	6.71

Note. SSI-R = Supervisory Styles Inventory = Revised. SERF-R = Supervisor Emphasis Rating Form = Revised.

^a These Ns represent the number of counselors for whom data on the SSI-R were available.

^b For the SERF-R, lower scores indicate stronger preferences.

In regard to our research question of preferences for supervisory emphases, both groups of practicing counselors preferred an emphasis on conceptual skills, followed closely by personalization skills and process skills. Both groups least preferred a focus on professional behaviors during supervision (see Table 2). One-way analyses of variance indicated that nonschool counselors preferred an emphasis on personalization skills to a significantly greater extent than did school counselors, $F(1,232)=15.79, p < .0001$, although school counselors desired an emphasis on process skills more than did counselors in other settings, $F(1,232)=21.95, p < .0001$.

To examine our research questions of significant differences on preferences for supervisor style and supervisory emphasis by experience indexes, for the group of school counselors, a 2 (d=Degree) x 3 (Counseling Experience) MANOVA was performed on the three SSI-R scales, and a 2 (Degree) x 3 (Counseling Experience) MANOVA was performed on the four SERF-R scales. Neither of the MANOVAs indicated a significant multivariate effect (see Table 3). Therefore, follow-up univariate ANOVAs were not conducted.

For the group of nonschool counselors, a 2 (Degree) > x 3 (Supervision Experience) x 3 (Counseling Experience) MANOVA was conducted on the three scales of the SSI-R, and a similar MANOVA was conducted on the four scales of the SERF-R. The only multivariate main effect that was significant was postdegree supervision experience on the SERF-R scales (see Table 3). Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that postdegree supervision experience had a significant effect on a preferred focus on professional behaviors, $F(2, 101)=6.5, p=.0022$, and

personalization skills, $F(2, 101)=5.36, p=.0061$). For nonschool counselors, having more hours of postdegree supervision experience was associated with a lesser preference for an emphasis on professional behaviors but a greater preference for personalization skills (see Table 4).

TABLE 3. MANOVA Results on SSI-R and SERF-R Scales

Item	Wilk's Lambda	School Counselors ^a		
		F	(df)	p
SSI-R Scales:				
Degree Level	0.99	0.31	(3,84)	.817
Supervision Experience				
Counseling Experience	0.96	0.66	(6,168)	.686
Degree Supervision				
Degree Counseling	0.92	1.19	(6,168)	.313
Supervision Counseling				
Degree Supervision Counseling				
SERF-R Scales:				
Degree Level	0.97	.59	(4,83)	.675
Supervision Experience				
Counseling Experience	0.93	.74	(8,166)	.654
Degree Supervision				
Degree Counseling	0.98	.22	(8,166)	.988
Supervision Counseling				
Degree Supervision Counseling				
Item	Wilk's Lambda	Nonschool Counselors ^b		
		F	(df)	p
SSI-R Scales:				
Degree Level	0.96	1.59	(3,101)	.198
Supervision Experience	0.91	1.54	(6,202)	.166
Counseling Experience	0.93	1.27	(6,202)	.273
Degree Supervision	0.95	0.90	(6,202)	.497
Degree Counseling	0.96	0.65	(6,202)	.690
Supervision Counseling	0.88	1.14	(12,267)	.993
Degree Supervision Counseling	0.97	0.27	(12,267)	.993
SERF-R Scales:				
Degree Level	1.00	0.12	(3,99)	.949
Supervision Experience	0.84	2.99	(6,198)	.008
Counseling Experience	0.91	1.54	(6,198)	.167
Degree Supervision	0.93	1.14	(6,198)	.341
Degree Counseling	0.97	0.54	(6,198)	.782
Supervision Counseling	0.90	0.85	(12,262)	.603
Degree Supervision Counseling	0.91	1.08	(9,241)	.376

Note. SSI-R = Supervisory Styles Inventory-Revised. SERF-R = Supervisory Emphasis Rating Form-Revised.

^a For these SSI-R analyses, N = 92 school counselors due to missing data on classification variables.

^b For SSI-R analyses, N = 121 nonschool counselors to missing data on classification variables. For SERF-R analyses, N = 118 due to missing data.

Tukey's HSD test indicated that nonschool counselors with 48 or fewer hours of postdegree supervision had a significantly greater preference for an emphasis on professional behaviors than did those with the highest level of postdegree supervision experience (201 or more hours). The middle-level supervision group (49 to 200 hours) preferred this emphasis to a significantly greater extent than did the highest level group but was not significantly different from the lowest level group in this preference. The group with the highest level of postdegree supervision

experience (201 or more hours) preferred a focus on personalization skills to a significantly greater extent than did the group with the lowest supervision experience (0 to 48 hours).

TABLE 4. Mean Scale Scores for SERF-R Scales by Post-Degree Supervision Experience Levels for Non-School Counselors

	Supervision Experience Levels								
	0-48 Hours			49-200 Hours			201 or More Hours		
	N ^a	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Professional Behaviors	35	43.40	6.09	55	44.82	6.34	32	48.63	5.39
Process Skills	35	38.43	4.34	55	38.53	5.57	32	37.75	5.61
Personalization Skills	35	36.11	5.82	55	33.40	6.53	32	30.97	6.24
Conceptual Skills	35	32.06	6.48	55	33.26	6.70	32	32.66	6.82

Note. SSI-R = Supervisory Styles Inventory-Revised. SERF-R = Supervisory Emphasis Rating Form-Revised. Lower scores indicate stronger preferences.

^a Ns do not add to 168 due to missing data on the SERF-R and hours of post-degree supervision experience.

DISCUSSION

In conducting this survey, we sought an indication of practicing counselors' preferences for supervisory style and focus. Several results that may inform supervision practice were obtained. First, respondents indicated that they preferred a supervisor who is collegial and relationship oriented over one who is task oriented. In general, these results are consistent with previous research on developmentally based supervision (e.g., Friedlander & Ward, 1984; Worthington, 1987), in that respondents' preferences were similar to those expected of counselors with some training and experience (e.g., preference for supervisor-consultant over supervisor-teacher). Second, respondents said that they preferred a supervisor to emphasize conceptual, personalization, and process skills over professional behaviors. These preferences were somewhat in contrast with expected results, particularly the desired focus on specific skills and techniques.

Respondents' preferences, however, differed somewhat by their work setting. In contrast with nonschool respondents, school counselors reported a stronger preference for the task-oriented style of supervision and, to a greater degree, desired a focus on specific skills and techniques. It seems that school counselors may have slightly different needs and preferences for supervision than do counselors employed in other settings. In particular, school counselors may desire a teacher-supervisor who provides instruction about specific interventions.

We also investigated the relationship of three indexes of experience (i.e., level of academic training, months of counseling experience, and hours of postdegree supervision) with counselors' reported preferences. The only significant effect (for nonschool counselors only) was hours of postdegree supervision. Having more postdegree supervision experience was associated with stronger preferences for an emphasis on personalization skills and less emphasis on professional behaviors. These results are in accordance with developmental models (e.g., Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981), some previous research (e.g., Wiley & Ray, 1986), and findings on the first part of the survey (Borders & Usher, 1992). In effect, nonschool counselors with more postdegree supervision experience may be more open to discussions about how their own attitudes, beliefs, and feelings are influencing their clinical work with clients. It is unclear, however, what elements of their previous supervision may have contributed to this preference.

The three indexes of experience were less associated with counselors' preferences than may have been expected, based on developmental models (e.g., Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981) and some previous research (see Worthington, 1987). Because the conversion of the continuous data on counseling and postdegree supervision experience into categorical variables for the analyses of variance resulted in a loss of variance, our ability to detect significant relationships may have been reduced. It is also possible that marginal reliabilities for some of the SERF-R scales contributed to the lack of statistically significant findings.

Other factors also may influence counselors' supervision preferences. There are conceptual and empirical indications that developmental level is more complex than are composites of experience indexes; changes in cognitive-developmental level, in particular, may need to be considered (e.g., Blocher, 1983; Borders, 1989; Borders, Fong, & Neimeyer, 1986; Loganbill et al., 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). Additional research investigating theoretically based developmental variables (e.g., cognitive-developmental level) and other possible predictors (e.g., work setting characteristics, theoretical orientation) may help identify those factors that influence counselors' supervision preferences.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations, the moderate return rate for the survey of NCCs and missing data for the statistical analyses conducted for this study calls into question the generalizability of these results to the population of NCCs. This study is further limited by the extent to which the NCC sample is representative of the population of counselors as well as the reliance on counselors' self-reports of preferences. In addition, the SERF was designed to measure beginning students' preferences; items may not have included all the emphasis areas that practicing counselors would like addressed during supervision. Nevertheless, these results (along with Borders & Usher, 1992) provide the first documentation of practicing counselors' preferred supervisory style and focus, and indicate the need for further work to determine the factors that influence these preferences.

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